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ABSTRACT

Most study halls in most high schools are not arenas of constructive leisure, but rather, exercises in creative discipline for the teachers. Students practice wasting, not using, time. One high school in Illinois, however, implemented a successful study hall plan. The traditional study hall was divided into three areas defined by the arrangement of the furniture: the quiet area, the activity area, and the conversation area. Students responded positively to the new program. Attendance increased, and learning began to take place. (Author)

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Study Halls:

An Educational Wasteland to an Educational Mecca

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Introduction

With the advent of the departmentalized high school came the simultaneous introduction of the study hall. Conforming to the belief that everybody has to be some place all of the time, the designers of study halls saw them as places for students who by virture of scheduling or personal choice, had a free hour during the school day. Their intention was to provide these students with the opportunity to get a head start on the day's assignments or to use the time for constructive leisure through self-enrichment reading.

A visit to most study halls should make it readily apparent that study halls in general are not an arena of constructive leisure, but rather, an exercise in creative discipline for the teacher. Students practice wasting, not using, time. The most common activities include writing and passing notes, reading comic books, and, of course, sleeping. Because of the lack of any educational simulation, trips to the wastebasket or pencil sharpener or water fountain are considered major amusements.

Study halls do provide students with a task. "Occupy this hour," they are told. "Do something constructive. But don't get out of your seat. Don't make any noise. Don't distract the other students. Don't eat." The hidden agenda leaves nothing for students to do but read, write, or sleep. And some schools forbid sleeping!

Although the study hall has been disbanded in many schools, it still exists in the majority of schools. What is proposed here, then, is a study hall plan which was successfully implemented in an Illinois high school. The traditional study hall was divided into three areas: a study area, an activity area, and a conversation area--areas you might find in an elementary school classroom. The areas were defined by the arrangement of chairs and desks and other furnishings and by a bookcase partition.

Area I: Quiet Area

The quiet area retained the function of the original study hall. Students in this area could read, do homework, write letters, or do any other reading-writing type activity. But they were also allowed to assist each other in completion of homework or in explaining material. Students took it upon themselves to bring furniture from home to provide comfortable places to sit and read in the quiet area. A paperback book and magazine drive was also initiated so that entertaining reading material would be available to students. Magazines especially proved to be very popular. Someone was always paging through Newsweek, Sports Illustrated, or Seventeen.

Area II: Activity Area

This more active area was used for both individual and group activities. A small budget was allotted for the rehabilitation of

the study hall. These monies were used to equip the activity area. Checkers and chess were purchased as well as word games such as Scrabble and Roll-a-Word. By the end of the year almost every student knew how to play chess. Jigsaw puzzles were always in progress, with students casually discussing world and school issues while looking for missing pieces. Games, microscopes, and models--brought by students from home--supplied many students with new experiences in the activity area.

Larger group activities also took place in the activity area. They ranged from a staged version of "The College Bowl" to a home economist leading a discussion on the importance of a good diet and offering samples of carrot cake to participants. Guest speakers were by far the most popular group activity. Students were encouraged to enlist the services of parents, friends, even other teachers, provided the speaker was approved by the study hall teacher (now better labelled "activity coordinator") and other students expressed an interest. Included among the guest speakers were a magician demonstrating his skills, a local college football player explaining the team's losing streak, a folk guitarist playing a few songs, and an astrologer discussing the signs of the zodiac.

A note of caution might be added. Playing cards were initially allowed in the activity area, but were later banned because of overuse.

Students volunteered to donate stereo systems and television, but these were not permitted because of the dangers of over-use or misuse.

Area III: Conversation Area

The purpose of this area was to allow a free exchange of ideas to help students get to know one another better and to appreciate the varying viewpoints of other students. The "rap area," as it was soon called by students, was a corner of the old study hall in which a collection of overstuffed chairs and comfortable sofas were arranged in a circle.

Sometimes the study hall coordinator picked a topic to be discussed or followed a suggestion of a student. On other days the conversation was completely open. Most times a facilitator was present whose function it was to turn random conversation into a meaningful exchange of ideas. To fill the role of facilitator, the services of the school counseling staff was tapped. This gave members of the counseling staff an opportunity to meet with and get to know students in an informal setting. It gave students an opportunity to know the counseling staff under the same circumstances and to become more aware of the counseling service as a source for many kinds of help. During the hours when the counselers were unable to man the area, undergraduate students enrolled in a teacher training curriculum at a local university volunteered to fill the gaps.

At times, however, the group was leaderless, and the study hall coordinator took over the facilitator role.

Participation in the rap sessions permitted no interrupting or swearing. Students who violated these rules or were otherwise judged generally discurteous were asked to leave the area. The rap area was the most popular of all the areas. There never seemed to be a shortage of enthusiasm or wisdom.

Outcome:

Students responded positively to the new study hall program. Attendance increased, and learning began taking place. The areas hummed with activity since they gave students the time and the opportunity to do what there was never time for in classrooms. What essentially happened was that the study hall became a modified version of an open classroom, with students learning a variety of things, getting involved in many projects, and liking themselves and each other better as a bonus.

The need for guidlines was discovered as problems arose. As a result TV, music of any kind, dancing, and card playing were banned, preventing the study hall from becoming merely a recreational lounge. Requests for a pop machine were also denied, and all food was forbidden. Violence or threat of violence resulted in removal from the study hall.

The division of the hall into quiet area, activity area, and conversation area seemed to supply all the needs of the students.

Anyone needing an especially quiet area to study was sent to the library. These requests were few and far between.

In no time at all, the room, available to students all day long, was turned from a dull, unprofitable study hall into a place of learning in a warm, encouraging atmosphere-- an atmosphere which the students themselves helped to create by their donations of posters, bookcases, couches, tables, chairs, lamps, and most of all, by cooperative behaviors. In other words, this study hall project was an overwhelming success.